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ABSTRACT

This document contains two essays, both of which discuss the ascendancy of the learning paradigm over the teaching paradigm. "Philosophy and the Learning Paradigm" reviews the effects of post-modernism on student learning with regard to loss of authority in the classroom, lack of academic standards in writing, and perceptions of professors as oppressors. Suggested in the new pedagogy of learning are the use of humor, irony, and parody in helping teachers be more effective. "Sailing between Paradigms" proposes a balance between learning and teaching. In the old paradigm, where the professor is the center of attention and control in the learning environment, measurements of intelligence are limited, and students bright and capable of learning are excluded. The new paradigm of student-centered learning offers many more choices. Technology, change in attitude, and partnerships between students and teachers also are large parts of the new paradigm. Specific to the study of philosophy, this article asserts that faculty wish for their students to have an exposure to philosophy at an early age that creates a strong foundation with which they can live their lives in pursuit of original thought. (AS)

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Two Essays on the Learning Paradigm

Robert E. Doud

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Philosophy and the Learning Paradigm

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I am a teacher of philosophy in a California Community College. There is no more diverse environment in the world than the campus of a California Community College. There were days this year when I heard no fewer than fourteen languages spoken by my students. I remember days when classrooms were places of great ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, but those days are long gone. I am not here to bring students up to the standards of the past, but to help them create the standards by which success will be measured in the future.

I used to think of the teacher as creating a spell in the classroom, as projecting around herself an aura of interest in the subject and competence in presenting it. This aura enthralled the students and motivated them to enter into its contagion and to seek contamination by it. I would compare the teacher in my own mind to an actor on the stage, both entertaining the audience and dazzling them with the virtuosity of the performance. It was the job of the audience to prove it was up to the performance of the teacher. They would do this by drawing me to the peak of my performance through the intensity of their interest. Needless to say, I

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sought, often in vain, for the sense of vital connection with the audience which is also indispensable to the actor.

I now realize that what I have before me is a post-modern audience that is in many ways not an audience at all. My students are no longer an audience for me, because they are not there to hear what I have to say. The authority of the teacher is not what it was, because authority as such is not what it was. The ironic turnabout lies in the fact that the teacher, in this case, me, is the one learning from the students. What I am learning is how to teach this group of students, and they indeed are the only ones qualified to be my teachers in this delicate subject area. It is with this new sensibility of humble docility that I enter the classroom. This is the post-modern learning paradigm.

My attitude now is that there is learning of some sort going on before I enter the classroom, and that I might be the one interrupting the learning process when I arrive. The people before me are not like me. I never lived in their world. I never was their age. I do not think their thoughts, nor do they think mine. I cannot presume that they want to think my thoughts. Nevertheless, we can get along and learn from each other. I can guide them in a learning process, but I cannot overstep myself. To presume upon what is not there is to lose my audience completely. They vote with their feet; if they get turned off, they just don't show up. If they do show up, they bring with them minds molded by media technology. The teacher, if she presumes to lecture, is a cathode ray tube in front of which one walks, eats or

chats without excuse or regard. Should I see this as conventional discourtesy or as a post-modern message about antiquated pedagogy?

Post-modernism is not just a loss of authority; it's a loss of arrogance. To be a white male with a Ph.D. and professorial rank used to be a distinction. Nowadays it's a mark of arrogance. One is suspected of being an oppressor rather than a professor. The only way to regain authority is to act as if I have none. Better said, I must relinquish authority in order to buy influence. The influence I want to buy back is the power to guide creative, informed and critical thinking in my students. The content of my classes is now no longer as important as the participation of my students, and probably never was.

Helpful in the new pedagogy of learning are humor, irony, and parody. If I can see the humor in my own efforts to communicate, in which the manner of my communication often defeats what I am attempting to do, I may be more effective. Self-parody, at least in my own imagination as I am doing my teaching, is helpful in accommodating myself to the perceptions of my students. Sometimes I say out loud: "Here's an old man gassing on about Hegel," and it seems to help a bit. Any remark that will get a sympathetic snicker from a student is helpful.

Some of my students come from homes and backgrounds in which exquisite use of the English language is not a value. Subtlety and variety in expression and correctness in construction were values in my home, schools, and community. Sadly or not so sadly, this is not the case for most of my students, for whom

functional English is good enough. Appreciation of humor and cleverness in displays of verbal proficiency is not common among them. It is, rather, a sign of arrogance and classism, it closes them out of a world in which they do not feel welcome.

Writing is also a lost art, a craft as quaint as quilt-making. For many, it is a sign of arrogance and classism to write well or to write much. Many students labor to write a seven line paragraph in answer to an essay question in a philosophy class. An expectation of anything beyond this is most unreasonable to their minds. Some days it seems that academic standards have been pared down about as far as they can be pared.

Does the academy see the connection between what it talks about in the inflated terms of post-modernism and deconstruction, and the reality of what we face in our own classrooms? Lack of etiquette and respect, of authority and standards, is one side of a reality which also includes the elimination of stodginess, classism, and arrogance. The teacher is on the firing line created by this ambiguity. I like having a place on this firing line. Although mine will not be a perfect solution, it will make a difference in the future created by these students.

All these matters are at issue in the question of the ascendancy of the learning paradigm over the teaching paradigm. Faculty are there as a transparent force to bring students into contact with information, to catalyze the process by which information becomes knowledge, and to serve as the philosopher's stone -

while magically maintaining transparency -- whereby knowledge becomes wisdom. Information and knowledge will be on the test, but no, there's still no way of testing for wisdom.

Sailing between Paradigms

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There are two paradigms of education in contemporary discussion. On one, the teacher is the center of attention and control in the learning environment; in the other, the students are the initiators of their own learning process, while the teacher is the guide or catalyst. Instead of presenting myself with a complete convert to the new learning paradigm, I would like to envision myself as sailing between the two paradigms. I may have left the far shore of the teaching paradigm, but I can see the learning paradigm only as a horizon in the distance. I am not yet a paragon or example of adherence to the new paradigm.

The students we are talking about in our stumbling eloquence about the new paradigm are bright and able to learn. But they are not always bright according to measurements that belong to the old paradigm. They do not learn in the way students learned in the past, and they are not interested in learning what students learned in the past. Their teacher does not select for them what these students will learn; the post-modern pedagogue may feel at first like a server in a cafeteria who spoons out what the customer selects.

The dishes set out to tempt today's information consumer must be enticing in order to appeal. Not everyone will order the same lunch. Choice is built into the menu. In our colleges today there are lifelong learners who will return many times to the steam table and its competing victuals. What philosophy faculty wish for their students is enough of an exposure to reflective thought at an early age, so that they will be prepared for later choices about how best to employ, enjoy, and pursue philosophy as they live their lives.

Philosophy, like calculus or microbiology, is not something that can be quickly ordered up, consumed, and digested. We cannot wait until we feel the need for knowledge in these areas before we put out the effort to understand them. We need to have acquired the habit of philosophy in order to benefit from what philosophy has to offer in making critical decisions. A sampling of the great ideas and a respect for logic must exist as sediment in the mind upon which later worthy reflections can accumulate.

Technology, that is, computers and their capabilities, are a big part of the new paradigm. The first half of the twentieth century brought movies, phonographs, radio, and television. These devices have conditioned students in how to respond or nor respond socially, often including awkwardness and discomfort in the conventional classroom situation. The second half brought the computer chip and more advanced uses for the cathode ray tube. It also brought the anxiety and urgency of learning how to master, or at least how to participate adequately, in the use of the new technology.

It is still true that critical and creative thinking cannot happen without the discipline of writing. The computer will not compose for students their own original thoughts. Writing elicits the formulation of ideas in ways that surprise and bring to maturity their student

authors. Students don't really know what they are going to say until they write it down. They need to experience the excitement of seeing ignorance dissolve and intelligence emerge as they work at the keyboard. There is a quality of thinking that does not come without perseverance in learning the writer's craft.

Students in the future will have less fear and guilt about passing courses and pleasing teachers, but more anxiety in knowing that there is information and power available which they must learn to access and apply. It is not the teacher with the ruler or the grade book who causes the anxiety anymore; it is the screen, terminal, and spaghetti that connect the student to his or her own future.

The teacher can be a partner in this learning process, but no longer the one who controls the process, or who is the primary dispenser of information. The new teacher sidesteps personal authority, and gives authority to the information as such and to the technology that dispenses it. The new teacher is the helper in gaining access to the information and in shaping it into knowledge. A new style of teaching is emerging, and part of that style is its sense of emergence, its sense of finding new information and applying it in new ways.

We can think our way into this new way of acting. A slight change in attitude toward oneself can bring us a long way toward the bidding shore of the learning paradigm. We can also act our way into this new way of thinking. A few changes in mode of presentation can give us lots to think about in terms of finding our new style. The personal touch remains important, and wisdom exists only as applied intelligently in present circumstances. In teaching, style is part of substance, and excitement belongs to the essence of what we do.

If you read Seneca, who is a classical philosopher, you find a post-modern thinker. He is known as a Stoic, but his mind travels over several philosophical systems. He makes use of Aristotle, Plato, and Epicurus, and he reflects constantly on his own experience. Nature, virtue, and tranquility are the themes of his philosophy, but his method is to inquire in all directions. He writes letters mostly, because his ideas are usually addressed to someone in a personal way.

When you are writing a letter, you do not lord it over your correspondent. You write to please them, to inform them, to sympathize with them, and perhaps to persuade them into a new way of thinking or acting. A letter has a personal tone and a personal style. Whatever the new paradigm will be, its challenge will be to keep learning personal. It will learn to treat the student with warm intimacy in an age of cool technology and the even cooler objectivity of mass communication. The teacher will care and be the heart amid all the hardware and software.

Seneca is a cosmopolite, a citizen of the world, even before he is a citizen of Rome. The information highway is the post-modern analogue for the perfect roadways of the Roman Empire. News comes in from everywhere. People travel. With news and the moving people come the philosophies that guide and interpret knowledge, converting it into wisdom. The philosopher then and now looks for wisdom, and discovers it not as an old lesson somehow preserved, but as a new reality that is as much created as discovered.